The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]

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Patricia Smith, Des Moines, IA
Louise Duvall
Urbandale, IA
12-6-10

Louise Duvall: I'm Louise Duvall and I am interviewing Pat Smith. We are conducting this interview in my home in Urbandale. Today's date is December 6. The year is 2010 and the time is 12:54 pm. Pat, I need to read this release to

you and then I need you to respond, "This is okay," or you give your permission or some other indication. Alright, all stories submitted to this project will become a part of the History of Blindness collection owned by the Iowa Department for the Blind. By submitting your story, you are acknowledging that your story is a gift, which transfers to the Iowa Department for the Blind all legal title and all literary property rights. You will be granting to the Iowa Department for the Blind, an unrestricted license to use your recording and all the information which it contains in any manner the Department for the Blind may wish to use it for, as long as the Iowa Department for the Blind wishes to use it. Do you agree to have your story recorded?

Patricia Smith: Yes.

Duvall: Alright, would you please state your name, age and where you live.

Smith: My name's Pat Smith, technically Patricia, but I've always been called Pat since I was about ten. I live at 415 East 48th Place in Des Moines.

Duvall: Can you tell me when blindness and blind people became an important part of your life?

Smith: In late 1970, my son had brain surgery for a brain tumor and, well, it was on Labor Day weekend in 1970. And it developed…The tumor was near the control of his eyesight and he ended up being blind. And he could only see light and dark and so I became interested in the Department for the Blind and stuff after that.

Duvall: At that time, in the early 1970s, this was before the laws assisting the handicapped to become integrated into populations, before I.D.E.A. was passed and those kinds of laws, and so most blind children, certainly someone who had lost as much sight as your son, Paul, would have attended the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School. What influenced you to choose to keep him home, rather than send him to the residential school?

Smith: Okay. You need to know a little bit about how he learned Braille. He had a…because he was in and out of the hospital, all of, through, from the first part of September until the end of October he was in the hospital most of six weeks or seven weeks and he was in, and out of the hospital and they were going to do Chemotherapy. And so, he had a teacher at home after he came out of the hospital. This was like in October. And she suggested that…and she knew someone, or she had talked to someone and they had suggested that somebody come out and teach Paul Braille at my house. So, we had a teacher who came out twice a week.

Her name was Marie Brown; she was a school teacher, but she also knew Braille, because she had Braille…she was Brailing for the Department. And so, she came out and taught Paul Braille. Well, we're talking, this is 1970, but because she was a school teacher and she knew some of the operation procedures, when it came spring, and he was able to get out more, because he had Chemotherapy in January and February, so he still was not able to go to school, she suggested that he do some…just go to where he had gone to school just to be with the people that he knew.

And so Marie Brown went to the school and talked to them about him coming and then she's the one that suggested maybe he should stay there. He was in, like 7th grade and he'd been with the children that were there for, from kindergarten on, so he knew the children and, yes it was a new school. He had to learn how to get around in it, because it was seven, junior high at that time. But she said, "I can take him up and teach him how to get around the school with a cane and all the other things." She knew how to do that, too, and so we ended up not even really thinking…she mentioned the Sight Saving School in Vinton, but she said she thought he could probably get along without it. And so, that's what we tried and it worked out, because he finished school in Saydel.

Duvall: So, he graduated with his regular class?

Smith: With the class that he started school with, yes.

Duvall: Okay, alright. Well, you mentioned that Marie Brown knew Braille, but she also taught travel?

Smith: Yes.

Duvall: With the White Cane?

Smith: Yes, a little bit. Yes, she…but she also took Paul down to…but she knew enough about the cane to help him with travel too. Some; maybe not as much as, you know, the travel teachers at the Department, but…so she knew enough to help him get around and to tell him how to get, you know, find things out.

Duvall: Now, how old would he have been in 1970?

Smith: He would have been twelve.

Duvall: So, he was twelve-years-old and he was in seventh grade?

Smith: A-hum.

Duvall: Well, I was going to ask how Marie Brown became a personal and a professional friend, and you've kind of touched on that a little bit; but that was more about what she did for Paul, rather than how you developed a friendship and professional relationship with her.

Smith: While Paul was learning Braille at the table, I kind of kept my eye on them and what was going on. And, I learned basic Braille, the alphabet and some of the contractions and things and I was helping him with it too. And, she helped me, too, in…and she was a very nice person who helped me and Paul both get adjusted to the fact that he was blind and all the problems that he had at that time. And, then in 1972 she said they have a volunteer workshop in the spring, and this was probably like January of '72. She says, "Why don't you come to the volunteer workshop this year," because she knew I was working with Paul on his Braille. I wasn't certified or anything, but I helped him at home with various things, so I went to the transcriber's workshop and I decided maybe I should just learn to do Braille. (Laughter) But, Marie and I, over the period of years, have stayed friends, you know, because she did a lot for him and in a way I helped

her out too, because, in the long run, she ended up being one of the first Itinerate Vision teachers in the state; and because of the fact that she had helped Paul out, so.

Duvall: Alright, let's see. You talked about looking over Paul's shoulder as he was learning Braille, but there must have been a little more formal training than that, for you to become certified.

Smith: Yes. After I knew a lot of the contractions, because Paul had been learning those, too, but I didn't know the rules and then, there is the manuals to teach people Braille. Well, I, after the workshop in the spring I decided I would get certified and so I talked to Marie Brown about it and she told me about the manual to learn Braille. So, I went through it and learned the rules; only I did it a little quicker than most people do. I did it in about two months (Laughter) because I had the basics down; I just didn't know all the rules. And then, I think I started working on my manuscript…the workshops were usually in April, and I think I started working on my manuscript, probably the end of June and I mailed it sometime probably in July. And, I got my certification back in September. (Laughter)

Duvall: That's a very fast turn-around all the way around! Who provided you with the equipment that you needed to do your Brailing?

Smith: The Temple Sisterhood. It was a Jewish lady's group who promoted Braille here in the state of Iowa. And, they did a lot of volunteer Braille work for the Department and for various people around the state.

Duvall: I didn't realize that they had ever been in a position to provide equipment. I thought maybe all the equipment had come through the Department

Smith: No.

Duvall: Well, that's good to know.

Smith: No, they provided several, or they provided Braillers for a lot of people. I can't tell you how many.

Duvall: Oh no, well, that's alright. You said you got your certification in September. Well, then what was your first project?

Smith: (Laughter) The library. Florence Grannis called me one day and she says, "Well I see you got your certification and would you like to work on some Braille?" Well, I said I could come down. So, I came down and I talked to her about it and she had a math book that she wanted me to work on. (Laughter)

Duvall: But, you had done Literary Braille.

Smith: Well, yeah, I'd done some Literary Braille, but at that time, Math Braille was not…it was a separate thing, but it was not…there weren't any lessons for it. When I started Math Braille, it was look up how do you do this, and you looked it up in the code book. And, you dug through the code book, and I'm talking about 1972.

Duvall: Yes.

Smith: Okay, the lesson book probably didn't come out until some time in the early '90s.

Duvall: Oh my!

Smith: I had worked with the Nemeth Code book most of the time. And, if you know anything about math, and I was good at math, so it wasn't a problem. If you knew anything about math, you could look up what's necessary. And, that's what I did. You know the right questions to ask when you're looking in the Code book. So, yeah, that's what, that's where I got the things.

The main thing about math was the fact that the numbers are dropped from the upper part of the cell to the lower and you always have your special signs like your parentheses and your plus and your minus and your division sign and your equals sign, and how you do the problems if they're, what do they call them? Anyhow, like a sighted person sees a math problem plus math problem. Those can be done in Braille. And, actually, you can do almost all problems that in the sense; they look just like the print.

In other words, if it's an equation, you write it across the page. If it's a math problem like addition or subtraction, you can write that out the way it needs to be, or if it's a multiplication or division problem, it can be written out the same as it would be in print. Takes a little work, but… (Laughter)

Duvall: And space; I would think a lot of…

Smith: It takes more space to do special Braille, if you want to call it that; where you're doing like addition problems that are like an addition problem on a page, you know, not five plus seven across the page, but up and down. It takes more space.

Duvall: What about…I think of math books, especially for the younger kids, as having a lot of graphs and some of them would be bar graphs and some of them would be circles and pie shapes and things, you don't do that on the Brailler, do you?

Smith: (Laughter) Well, if you're drawing things. It depends on what you're drawing. Sometimes it's easier to use a symbol, like you might use a "T" for triangle, or you might use, in math Braille, you could use something like there's a symbol that says what follows is a shape. You could use the shape symbol with a "T" to mean a triangle or the shape symbol with an "S" to mean a square. You can also draw. If you draw them, you're talking a lot more space, because you have to leave room for the kids to see these and usually, not the young ones always, but as you get a little older, most of them have to be labeled and, which takes more space. So, when you're talking about diagrams, you're talking possibly two to a page. Sometimes you might end up with just one map or something, or a big diagram to a page.

15:00

Duvall: I see.

Smith: So, you're talking a lot of pages.

Duvall: So, if you're drawing, then, what tool do you use? Do you Braille a row of dots or do you have some other kind of tool that embosses?

Smith: Today, you can do some of that on the computer, but most of it that I've done…although, I did work with the one program a couple of years ago. Most of it you do with a slate and stylus and a wheel, like a tracing wheel. And you draw it on the back of the paper and when you turn it over, you have to remember you're going to turn it over, because you have to do it backwards. If you've got an arrow pointing one way, you have to be sure it turns right when you turn it over; it's turned over the right way.

Duvall: Pointing the right direction.

Smith: The correct direction. (Laughter)

Duvall: I see, alright. I wanted to ask you what were you doing at the time, I mean, were you a stay-at-home mother?

Smith: Yeah, I was a stay-at-home mom.

Duvall: Okay, and Paul's like, your middle?

Smith: He's my middle. He's third of six kids, so he's the middle. There are two boys older than he is, and two girls and a boy younger than he is. So, yes, I was a stay-at-home mom the way it worked out. It was a little easier, although, after he was in school for a while, I did manage; thanks to Marie Brown, I had a part-time job. (Laughter) In '75 they

started the Area Education Agencies, and Marie Brown was one of the teachers who was with the vision…and she already knew some of the people who were in the agency, because she'd worked with Paul. And so, what she decided, or what she tried to do and it worked out, was promote a part-time job for somebody who knew Braille and Large Type, and was familiar with the things that the children would use; the equipment and that kind of thing.

So, in a sense, she promoted me a job. It was about 20 hours a week to begin with, but when I first started there wasn't a lot of Braille. I did some Braille for Paul, but most of it was large type because, at that time, they were beginning to keep some children with vision problems in the school system. If they were blind, they weren't necessarily there.

Duvall: Right. I don't know that much about the Des Moines school districts, but, aren't there two Special Ed schools, like Ruby Van Meter and there's another one.

Smith: Smouse?

Duvall: Smouse, yes.

Smith: Well, we were in the Saydel district, and that's outside the Des Moines district. Yes, they did have some special schools here in Des Moines, but because Paul and…but most of the children that were in those were had multiple handicaps. And so, he was not, you know, except for being blind, he was not multiply handicapped. That was his biggest problem at the time. So, yeah, there were schools here in Des Moines, but because he was in the

Saydel district. We just live outside the city, between Des Moines and Ankeny. (Laughter)

Duvall: Well, you talked about working at the AEA. How many years did you work there?

Smith: I worked there 15 years.

Duvall: 15 years, so that would be 1975 plus 15?

Smith: You're talking about 1990, yeah.

Duvall: 1990. When you got ready to retire, how many hours were you working?

Smith: I was up to full-time then.

Duvall: 40. You were working 40.

Smith: Well, at that time I think there was about 37 and-a-half hours a week, now 40, but it was full-time.

Duvall: Well then, if you were working full-time, for the AEA, did you have any time to be doing any Brailing for the Department?

Smith: Oh, yes. (Laughter) I would Braille on weekends, and I would Braille in the summertime and most of my Braille has been text books. I did...after I did the first. I never really had anything easy to do. I did the first...it was a chapter in a math book to be. And, well, there may be a couple. Anyhow, my first full thing that I completed was a Spanish-

English poetry book. And, I want you to remember that back then, we're talking about not doing it on the computer, but doing it by hand on a Braille writer.

Duvall: Oh my!

Smith: And, the Spanish was on one page, the English was on the other page. I don't remember if I separated them, or if it was a line of Spanish and then a line of English, but I'm thinking that's what it was. Anyhow, it was, don't ask me how many pages, I can't tell you. But, it was a few pages and that was my first full one. It's still in the library, I'm sure, some place. (Laughter)

Duvall: It seems like I used to hear people talk about needing to learn the Braille code, that when you are a reader of Braille its sort of practical stuff; but if you are the Braillist you have to know the absolute universal agreed upon rules. So, how do you keep up to date, because I'm sure the rules change?

Smith: Along the line some place, well, I think this was in, oh '77, '78 Marie Brown suggested, and she and I went to a National Braille Association workshop; or they have them every year or two in Kansas City. And, she and I went down and I went ahead and joined the National Braille Association. They have a magazine that they put out every three months, usually, which keeps you update and they'll tell you some of the new things that are going on. But, the Department also brings you up on the new Code books, but they don't tell you about the new things that they're working...some of its working on, the National Braille

Association will keep you up on that. And then, when there's some new stuff to…we used to get a lot of information at the volunteer workshop that we have in the spring, too. And then, the Department has supplied us with the new Code books when they come out, like the Literary Braille. And, well, if you look, I have a book shelf that has various books that the National Braille Association has put out that will help you learn to do something that you don't really know well how to do; like put together all of a complete book with the title page and the content pages and all the extra pages that have to be put in.

For example, it says, "This book is transcribed in Literary Braille or in Nemeth Code," or whatever or in some cases it would be Computer Code. And, well, something I haven't mentioned that we probably could…is Music Braille, too. They do Braille music. I have done a little bit of music Braille, but mainly I just did just a song or the lyrics to a song, which there's a way to write those out a little more specially than if you just write the words. There's also just the notes for the song, and I could probably go back and do that, but I never pushed it to learn how to do all the chords and things. I have done some of it, but I never really worked at it hard.

Duvall: Do you play an instrument?

Smith: I used to play the piano, but I don't much.

Duvall: So, you understand a little bit about how to read music.

Smith: Yes, I can read music, that's not the problem. It's just that it's a little more difficult because I was very busy with Math Braille. And, that's mainly…I'd mainly done Text Book Braille; done text books for kids, rather than, you know, a lot of other things. I have done some Literary Braille along the line, but mainly I have done text books, because they felt they were needed.

Duvall: Absolutely! Well, you always mention text books, but did you also do, like, the work sheets and things that the kids needed for their day to day…

Smith: When I was at the A.E.A. especially, I did work sheets a lot.

Duvall: And, those are disposable, so.

Smith: Yes, those are disposable and it depended on whether I was doing them on my Braille writer or on, on a computer. Let's see, we could talk about that, I guess.

From '70 to about '80 I did most of my Braille on a Braille writer, Perkins Braille writer. Then I had an Apple computer, and that was what we had at work at the time. And, there was a gentleman who put out a computer program called Edit. It lets you Braille on the computer and then print it out. And, how it was printed out at the time was on a special Perkins Brailler. You put the regular paper in like you were going to Braille but it…electronically it did it for you.

Duvall: A Perky. Didn't they call that the Perky?

Smith: Yeah, could be, I think. I don't remember now, what they called it. (Laughter)

Duvall: It did one sheet at a time.

Smith: One sheet at a time, yes. But, I did that for probably, what, five years or so I would say.

Duvall: Explain. You say Braille on the Apple? You use the key strokes like you were visualizing it as being the Braille writer?

Smith: Yes. And, that's what I still do. Rather than type it in, which can be done today, you can type it and it will be translated to Braille…They had worked and…you have to have a special keyboard, because some keyboards won't do it.

Duvall: Okay.

Smith: You can use six keys that work like the six keys on a Braille writer. Your space bar would work like the space bar and, I've forgotten…you hit the return and it puts it on the next line, or whatever. But, most of the programs today will let you…well, you just keep Brailling and it works now. But, at one time, you had to put it down on the next line like you would have on a Braille writer.

Duvall: So, this would be a little softer strokes. You don't have to push as hard, and, if you make a mistake, it's easier to…

Smith: Much easier to correct on a computer than it is…

Duvall: You just backspace and do it again?

Smith: Yeah.

Duvall: And, it would save it, so you could make multiple copies?

Smith: Yes.

Duvall: All those sound like advantages. What would you see on the screen?

Smith: Most of the time you see the Braille, the dots.

Duvall: The dots; the formed dots?

Smith: Yes, the dots. And, I learned when I was working with it and, of course, doing it on a Perkins Brailler you learned to proof read the dots. I never learned to do it with my fingers. I sight read it. (Laughter) That sounds silly, but yes, I know.

And, if you do it…and, what I did most of the time was I would do the Braille if I had the time. And, I usually could work it out, so I did. I would do it one day and then I would proof read it the next. You don't want to go back and…It's just like typing. If you go back and proof read right away, you're going to make the same mistake twice.

Duvall: I believe it. Well, speaking of proof reading, it seems to me that at one time the Department used to hire

blind people to be proof readers, at ten cents a page maybe, even at the most. Is that still something…do you think that people are still proofing your work or…

Smith: Yes.

Duvall: Okay, so do you get feedback then?

30:00

Smith: Yes, I do. I sent in…now not necessarily all the text books, you know all that, but I did a Literary Braille thing and they did get that proof read and I did get it back and they wanted me to then go in and change my mistakes on the computer, so that they could print it out and not have any more problems with it.

Duvall: Absolutely.

Smith: So, yeah. They still do that and I don't know whether they pay them or not. But yes, they do proof read.

Duvall: I had wondered. You would want a perfect copy.

Smith: Yes.

Duvall: If you're going to be asking children to do math problems, if you give them the wrong numbers their answers are going to be wrong, of course.

Smith: Right.

Duvall: But, the other part of that is everybody's on such a timeline usually for the text books that adding that step of sending it off to be proofed and coming back and having you correct it, and whatever, could really slow down kids getting their books.

Smith: Yeah, it does. So, I don't know exactly what the Department does on that particular type of thing. I know I actually did a college text book a while back that was in math that was, I don't remember now, exactly if it was algebra or trigonometry, or whatever, and it had drawings in it too. But, that…I'm usually pretty careful when I go back and proof read for math stuff, because you don't want the figures to be wrong. And, once you get started at it, it's not too hard to proof read your own, especially if you let it set for a day, so you're going back and looking at dots that you don't have the rest of it in your mind.

Duvall: I see.

Smith: And, I used to sometimes go back with a pencil and print it above it and then proof read against the book. (Laughter)

Duvall: Good techniques. I could see why they would keep asking you to Braille, because it sounds like you're very conscientious. You have mentioned several different types of Braille Codes, and the Codes are the instructions and the rules.

Can you kind of summarize what is Literary Code, and how is it different from the Nemeth, and just kind of describe what they look like and how they might be different?

Smith: Well, the biggest difference between Literary and Math Braille or Nemeth, as most people call it, is the fact that the numbers are in the lower part of the cell in Nemeth. And, if you don't know Braille, there's six dots in a cell. They're numbered down the side one, two, and three and then the other side is labeled four, five, and six. The top part of the cell is one and two and four and five. The bottom part of the cell, if you say it that way, is two and three and five and six, in other words. So, I...what you do is actually the numbers are "A" through "J," I think it is. I had to stop and think about it. (Laughter)

Anyhow, it's one through zero, and you know, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, zero. Okay, so if you drop those down, then they become...but it also makes it...and you use the number sign, not every case do you use the number sign in Math Braille. In Literary Braille, you always use the number sign with any kind of numbers. In Math Braille you do not always use the number sign. There are times when you use it, and times when you don't. You also have...I can't tell you now. They've done some differences on that, but the plus and the minus and the times and the divided by signs. And, those work in both; but if you're using them in Math Braille then, if you got a times sign, which like would be an "X" or a dot, depending on how they wrote it in the book. Any number that would come right after that would be in the lower part of the cell, and you wouldn't have to use the number sign.

And, that's the reason that Math Braille works a little differently than Literary Braille; because Math Braille you don't need to use a number sign for every time you put a number in; a new one. It depends on what comes. If you

have a space before it, then you need a number sign. But, you can write an equation that would take a lot of space, and if you put a number sign in it, it might take two lines in Braille. You can usually do it in less than one line in Nemeth Braille.

Duvall: Okay. Give me an example. You talk about "A" through "H" and one through zero, so the letter "A" in print, in Literary Braille, would be dot?

Smith: Dot one. And, if you were doing Nemeth, it would be dot two.

Duvall: Okay. And the "B" would be…

Smith: The "B" is one, two and in Nemeth is two, three.

Duvall: Alright, have a little example there. (Laughter) Alright, well, so, what about Music Braille? How in the world do you…when I think of, visualize a page of music, you have clefs and you have note values and you have…

Smith: There is a sign for the clefs. I can't give you…Well, I'm thinking the bottom part of the cell is the note value, but I can't tell you now. It's been a while since I've done any Music Braille. But I think the top four dots depend on what the note is, as I remember that. Like in "A," "B," "C," "D," "E," "F," and a "G" that's the notes. And, it would depend…There is a clef sign and there is a way to show whether it's "C" that's just below the staff or the "C" that's up in the middle. There's a way to show it. I can't remember how it's done, but there's a way to show it.

Duvall: Well, that's why you're the math expert and not the music expert.

Smith: (Laughter) I'm not a music expert. Oh, and something we didn't mention, which goes a way with math is Computer Code. And, that mainly…it uses the lower numbers, but it uses no contractions. It doesn't use any of the literary contraction type things. Everything's written out. If it's a word, it's written out in Computer Braille.

Duvall: I see.

Smith: It uses the lower numbers and it uses some of the number signs from Nemeth, but the rest of it…anything else is written out. So, there is a difference in that and the Nemeth. And, Literary Braille mainly just uses the…and what did I figure out, there's something like 200 contractions all together.

Duvall: Oh my!

Smith: Well, by the time you take the alphabet and you have some contractions, you have upper cell, lower cell, forward contractions, the punctuation; you have about 200 different code, you know, Braille things you have to learn.

Duvall: How fat is the Literary Code book, the instruction book, or rule book?

Smith: Oh, it's about an inch to an inch-and-a-half. (Laughter)

Duvall: I see. (Laughter)

Smith: Nemeth's about...well, and depending on what you're looking at, there is one that's eight-and-a-half by eleven size; and that one's about an inch. That's the Literary Braille code. Okay, the Nemeth Code book is about the size of a piece of Braille paper, which is ten-and-a-half by eleven and something, or whatever the size of Braille...I've forgotten, now. Anyhow, but it's an inch and a quarter, or at least, thick.

And, what they have in...well, the Literary Braille and the Nemeth book both have examples of what you're going to be doing. And, they have it in print and then they have simulated, what's called Simulated Braille. It gives you a Braille cell with very faint dots, and then if those dots are filled in to finish, to make the word or a letter or a contraction, they're darker.

Duvall: I see.

Smith: So, you still have the Braille cells, but you know which dots you're supposed to be using. And so, you've got those in all your Code books. So, helps you learn how to do them. (Laughter)

Duvall: Well, I was going to ask you what kind of tools you've used over the years to produce Braille.

Smith: Oh, something I left out before you get to that is when you're doing drawings, you need a rubber pad for underneath, because you're using a tracing wheel to

make…to raise the dots and things and other things. Now, go ahead and finish that. (Laughter)

Duvall: That fits right in. To produce your Braille, you've mentioned the Perkins Braille writer, you mentioned a slate and stylus.

Smith: Right.

Duvall: You mentioned the Apple computer was what you used for the A.E.A.

Smith: Right.

Duvall: Now that you're retired from the A.E.A. and working full-time, well…

Smith: At home?

Duvall: Yes, at home. (Laughter) You're using equipment from the Department, and that's not going to be an Apple.

Smith: No, those are the, I've forgotten what they're called, but anyhow, they use Windows mostly.

Duvall: PC?

Smith: PC, yeah. Anyhow, Personal Computer, whatever you want to call it. Yeah, I have used…well I used the Edit on the Apple, then for a while the Department used Polka Dot, which is the computer one, and now we're using Braille 2000, which is very good, because it automatically puts in

headings on pages. Once you do the...and we use a running head at the Department all the time, so each page has the title of whatever you're doing. And, it automatically puts it in for you, which helps a lot, because you always had to do that on each page. Okay, it will also do your...well, you need to tell that...you need to tell most of the computer programs when you're on a new print page, because most...and today, they're even doing Literary Braille that way. It used to be Literary Braille you just Brailled it without...and each page was whatever page came up.

Today...And, it's partly because of the text books. A text book, if you're doing a fairly good size page, a text book's going to take at least two Braille pages, sometimes three. And, you would have wherever it began. If it began at the top of the page, you have the page number, say 59. Okay, if that page number is continued to the next Braille page, then it's "A" 59. And, then if it's continued to another one, it would be "B" 59, meaning that this is all print that's on page 59 in the print book. And, that's the way they do text books.

Well, they have started doing that now some with Literary Braille, so that if you have the book...well, and they use print books in school today I guess too. And so, if the kids are using a particular print book, and it's being Brailled, then they need to have the same page that the other kids do. You know, I'm just talking about a story book.

Duvall: Sure, I understand.

Smith: So, they would have "A," "B," and "C," if that's necessary or whatever is necessary. Sometimes, I have had

pages with drawings on them that I might have "F" or "G," which means I've got six pages from the one page.

Duvall: One page of print.

Smith: Yeah. Depending on the number of drawings is usually what happens with that.

Duvall: Do you ever use the software, where you type using the Quirky?

Smith: No, I don't; never used that, because after doing it for, well, eight to ten years anyway, it was an automatic type thing. It's kind of a little bit like typing on a typewriter. Once you get the hang of it and it gets comfortable, you do it. Well, when I go to do a word like "and" I don't think "and," I think the symbol. Your mind does funny things, but, you know, that's the way I looked at it. When I'd see a word, I'd see the contractions. I wouldn't see exactly how it was spelled, necessarily. I would see the contractions as I went along, and so I'd put them in. It just was an automatic type thing after you did it in the Perkins Brailler, you know, that…no, I didn't go back to typing. (Laughter) I was much more comfortable with my six keys.

45:00

Duvall: You talked about Marie Brown being, sort of, your motivator and your mentor, and someone who got you a paid job using your Braille; all kinds of things. Have you had an opportunity to pay forward? That is, have someone that you have mentored or that you've been able to help?

Smith: I have at different times. I haven't really worked with anybody that ended up being real consistent, although I know a few different Braillists around the city and state because of various other reasons. And, you know, I've worked with them. I did help start a couple people. One was my sister-in-law. She worked on learning Braille for a while and then she got busy with other things. Never did finish her lessons. And, I've had other people that I worked with at various times. And, I've also…It's been a while, but I also have done a couple of workshops at the volunteer workshop thing.

Duvall: I was going to ask you. I would think that you'd be one of the senior, experienced Braillists. And, if they would ask you at times to share some of the things that you've learned with new Braillists coming along.

Smith: Yeah, I tried to…I can't tell you now. It's been four or five years since I did one at the department. But, I know one year we had…Well, during the…They usually have a thing to show people around the Department who maybe haven't been there before. And, this one year they had me up with a computer and the Brailler, and then showing them how I did some drawings and things. And, there were a lot of people who were interested in the difference and the sameness of the Brailler and the computer, and then how you did drawings. Yeah, it's…You know, I tried to help people and comment with them.

Duvall: Have you noticed year after year, when you go to that volunteer workshop in the spring; is it pretty much the

same crowd of people who come, who are the Braillists, or does that change over the years?

Smith: It changes some. We get some new people. We get some people who don't come every year that come every, you know, two or three different times, and of course, some of them are from out of town.

Duvall: And out of state, I think.

Smith: Yeah there's some from out of state, too. And, well, there's one lady who lives in northern Iowa who I seen…I haven't seen for a couple of years. And, then there's one that lives in western Iowa that I see occasionally. We keep track of one another more or less. (Laughter)

Duvall: Do you get any feel for why it is that others are so dedicated to their Braille?

Smith: I don't know. Maybe they're like I am, you know. I saw the need, especially for text book Braille, for text books for kids. And, I'd also seen the need for…and we have a…I can't say we have a large population of, you know, people who use Braille, but we have a large enough population that they're entitled to read the same kind of things I read. And, I read a lot, too. (Laughter) And, if they, they don't want to necessarily listen to them; they want to read them just like I want to see the print.

Duvall: And, it's how you learn to spell some of these words and some things.

Smith: Yes, definitely yes.

Duvall: Well, besides producing the Braille math books, how else do you use your knowledge of Braille and your skills in Braille?

Smith: Well, I have helped in…It's usually January, sometimes early February, they have what they call a Braille Challenge, which is young children…its children, school children, school aged children, some of them go to Vinton, some of them go other places. They come, usually to Des Moines, or occasionally to Ames, and they show how well they can do Braille. If they're good enough, they can get, oh, they win a state-wide, and then they go to a, oh, what would I call it? Well, there's a national, but there's something in between there I think.

Duvall: Oh, there is?

Smith: I'm not positive on that. I'd have to check with somebody at the Department. But, there is a national one, and that's out in California and I've forgotten who sponsors that now. But, these kids…And they get a trip to California if they, if they're smart enough or they know enough Braille.

Duvall: Is it the National Braille Press, is that…

Smith: I'm not sure whether it's the National Braille Press. I don't remember it for sure. It could be, but I'm not sure that's the correct title. But, they…The Braille Challenge.

Duvall: So, what do you do at the Braille challenge?

Smith: Usually, I check to see that they've Brailled things correctly. (Laughter) And, they need to have a certified…and it needs to be somebody that's sighted too, I guess, technically. It has to be somebody that's sighted, who is certified in Literary Braille, or in Braille. That's what I understand.

Duvall: There's a little prejudice there isn't there. (Laughter)

Smith: Well, you know, I don't know why, why they have to be sighted. But, that's…I think I read that one of the rules is that the judge that does it has to be sighted. They can have somebody check them over that is not sighted, but the person at the end who finishes it up has to be sighted.

Duvall: Who signs off on it?

Smith: Who signs off on it more or less, yeah. I've done that.

Duvall: So, is that all Literary Braille? Is that reading, writing, comprehension kind of thing?

Smith: Yes, it's…

Duvall: No math?

Smith: No, I think math included in this.

Duvall: Oh, they do, do math!

Smith: I think they do a little bit of math. I don't know that they did any drawings. I don't remember that, but they, whether they do math problems and that type of thing, in other words, it's how well they understand the Braille that they're using, in other words. Can they write things out? Can they…Do they understand what they're reading? Because there's a part there, where they have to write a few sentences about what they read.

So, there's about four or five different tests, I can't tell you now. I'd have to look it up; but there's some different tests for the kids. And, it depends on the…the beginning kids, you know, it's mainly just the alphabet and how well they can spell things. And, the older kids have been around for a while; they have to know more like you would in print.

Duvall: Of course, sure. Well, you've been Brailing a long time, have you any idea how many pages of Braille you may…

Smith: (Laughter) That particular one, I haven't really kept a good track of, but I did some estimating and I went back over what I've done in the last ten years. I have a little better thing now. You've got to remember I've been doing it about 38 years.

I figure your Literary Braille I've done about 3,550. Math Braille probably 15,000 and drawings for math Braille about 1,100 and that comes to about 19,650. (Laughter) So, over a period of time you're going to figure every year I've done…When I figured out the first year, or maybe the first eight or ten years I'm thinking, you know. Yes, I did a lot, but I was doing it on a Braille writer. I figured I probably did, in the first ten years, about 2,800. That's doing it all by hand

mostly. And, then after that I figured…oh, the last ten years I probably done about 8,000 and then between four or five, or somewhere in there for the other 20 years about 9,000 or so. It's an estimate, because I didn't really keep that good of track of it. (Laughter)

Except that I did…I went back. One of them I was looking up was, I did the college math book that I talked to you about and it had 1,760 pages and I did this book in…I started in May and I had to have it finished by October; and that's a lot of pages.

Duvall: Do you ever send a book in, in installments?

Smith: Oh, yeah. Most of the time I did; especially text books. Text books, you do a chapter at a time sometimes.

Duvall: So, the kids will have it in time for…

Smith: For what they need it for, yes

Duvall: That's a good idea.

Smith: So, no, mostly text books and, depends if I would get…And, I have done this, too. If I would get in, say, April or May a text book that they don't need until the first of August. That's when the Department normally asks for it back. If I can get it all done by the first of August and proof read it, then I would send the whole thing in; but if I don't, then I would send in what I've done and proof read by the first of August and then the rest of it would be sent later, because you keep doing…you keep working at it.

Duvall: Now, when you were using your Perkins Braille writer, the stack of Braille pages would pile up as you're working along. But, now, when you do it on the computer, you are sending it on a disk, or?

Smith: Yes, it varies.

Duvall: Or email it?

Smith: Well, you could email it. I have never, partly because I live here in the city of Des Moines. I usually put it on computer disks for a long time and now we have the little, teeny, what do they call them? I don't know. They're about an inch by a-half-inch square and a-half-inch around and an inch long or so. I forgot what they call them, now.

Duvall: SD card?

Smith: Yeah, just a little very small thing, but that's the difference in all computer stuff today. You can put it on a lot less space.

Duvall: And, then you just run it down to the Department.

Smith: I run it down to the Department. It's easier than putting it, for me it's easier than doing it in the mail.

Duvall: And safer. Oh, my, if anything were to happen.

Smith: Well, in most cases, if you do it on the computer, you're not going to lose your copy of that file.

Duvall: You've backed it up.

Smith: You back it up. You keep it.

Duvall: Well, what gives you your job satisfaction? What keeps you going? You're past retirement age.

Smith: (Laughter) Well, I've been past retirement age; I retired 20 years ago. That doesn't say I retired from Brailling. I know that the Braille that I do somebody's going to read. And, if I'm doing text books, I know the kids need it. Mainly, a lot of the text books, yes, can be on tape. But, when you're talking about things like Science and Math, I don't think tape works as well. And so, I think they need the print or the Braille. You know, they need the print if they're sighted and they need the Braille if they're not sighted, if they read Braille. And so, I thoroughly...I'll probably continue Brailing until I pass away. (Laughter)

Duvall: No problems with Carpel Tunnel or anything so far?

Smith: No. We're talking back in the early '80s, late '70s, I had a lady that I knew who worked for the Department and she lived here in Des Moines and she had to quit Brailing, because she couldn't do the Perkins Brailler anymore. The Brailler takes pushing with your hands, where the computer is, like, just a keyboard and you don't have to push it that hard.

And so, as far as Brailling, it's no harder than doing it... typing a letter or whatever you want to do. The keyboard is simple to use, you know, its just...And, as long as you know the program and you can read...And, one thing, although, I've

done it both ways. The one thing about proof reading, the Braille 2,000 will translate what you've printed, or what you have Brailled into print, so you can read it that way if you want; but you can also read it the other way. You actually have two options, I think. You can also put it into ASCII, which is one of the languages that, in other words, the contractions would come up as maybe an "and" sign or something off the computer, but, whatever, you can do it both ways, so you could…And, it doesn't hurt to do it both ways sometimes, depending on what you're doing.

1:00:00

Duvall: How long can you Braille at a time? Your hands get tired, or your eyes get tired or your brain goes numb, or?

Smith: Mainly till my brain goes numb. (Laughter) I have probably sat and Brailled probably two or three hours at a time. Maybe I take five minutes out and go get a cup of coffee or whatever, but no, depending…especially now that you do it on the computer, it's a lot easier and you can just sit and Braille away and not really even think about the time until you…You know, you do a chapter in a book or you were whatever. Unless you've got something you know you have to do later than you may meet time, but otherwise you just do what you want.

Duvall: Do you think there'll ever be a time when we won't need volunteer Braillists?

Smith: No. I really think that one way or another…And, I didn't mention that earlier. But, I think probably, except for

the ones that work for the Department, I was probably one of the first paid Braillists in the state of Iowa. Because, yeah, other people worked for the Department and Brailled, got paid; but nobody else did that I know of.

Duvall: You were real trend setters, too, among the A.E.A.; so that they, in fact, would hire someone who would produce Braille. Otherwise, it had not been deemed a particularly important position to establish or maintain.

Smith: Right. No. Well, with Vinton being, you know the school for the blind and stuff and there are a lot of people today who went there, still, because I know a few people that went there. And, you know, they're good people. They learned a lot there, but, in my son's case, you know, what I thought was that he was better off staying at home with the rest of the family and going to school with the kids he grew up with.

Duvall: Those are tough decisions that parents need to make.

Smith: Yeah, it's not the easiest thing in the world.

Duvall: Well, is there anything else that you would like to share, go on record for the oral history as...

Smith: Well, the only other thing that I can think of that I haven't mentioned is being on the Friends Board. (Laughter) Let's see, what's it been about five years, six years? I don't remember how many years, now, but somebody called me and said, "Would you be interested in helping work on a,

Friends of the Iowa Library for the Blind Board?" I think her name was Louise Duvall. (Laughter) But, I've been on the Board since, well, not the very beginning, but almost the beginning of that.

Duvall: Almost.

Smith: And, yes. I find that interesting. And, there's different people that have been there that are there for various reasons. But, they've all worked with the Department at one time or another. I think the Department has been a good thing. It's changed in the, what, 38, 40 years that I've known it, but the fact that we had very good people here who worked on it to begin with. I guess, there was a library here part-time, and then they got Mr. Jernigan to come and work on the other.

And, I think the fact that all of the Departments are together, where the Library and the people that work with Rehabilitation, Field-Op and all that; I think the fact that they're all together, and they know what the other guys are doing, makes a difference. It's a little bit like, I don't know, some lady had said, "Well, Voc. Rehab. could…" so, some of that. Well, there's a difference in people that are blind than some of the other problems that people have.

Duvall: Other disabilities.

Smith: Other disabilities, yes. You know, some of them really don't have much, except their blindness, and once they learn how to cope with that and the various other things like marking things for the cupboard and that kind of stuff, you know, I don't see any problem. And, I know quite a

few people that have worked on…their various times or still work there today. You know, they're just like anybody else, in most cases. (Laughter)

Duvall: Some would say that that's an Iowa philosophy; and not necessarily universal.

Smith: I'll agree there. I'll agree. I read, and I know, and even sometimes when I read something from the National Braille Association or some place, or one of the other organizations that deals with blind people, I'm thinking, "Come on, you're treating these people like they've got disabil…" well, maybe they got disabilities but that doesn't mean they're not bright people. And, that's the way some people treat them. Just anybody that's got a disability is stupid. Well, that's not true. (Laughter) But, I guess that's about probably everything that I can think of at the moment, and, yes, I think we will always need volunteer transcribers.

Duvall: Wonderful.

Smith: Yes, they have people who transcribe down there at the Department. But, still; there's a lot of things that could be transcribed with volunteer transcribers that won't get done otherwise.

Duvall: Absolutely. They can't keep up with the demand.

Smith: No.

Duvall: Well, thank you for your time and for your story. And, if you have anything else you want to add?

Smith: I can't think of anything at the moment.

Duvall: Alright. Well then, this concludes our interview.

Smith: Okay.

1:08:22
(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz
1-29-11